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ABSTRACT

Whole language approaches to the teaching of reading and writing have received broad support by United States advocates of "critical pedagogy." This paper outlines a case study of the Australian implementation of whole language inservice courses for the teaching of literacy in elementary schools. Drawing from post-structuralist theory and critical linguistics, it models a discourse analytic approach to curriculum research. The paper argues that a critical analysis of curriculum projects depends on a "situated reading" of extant relationships between the state and schooling. (Six notes are included and 31 references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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running head: Curriculum Research as Reading Practice

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CURRICULUM THEORIZING AND RESEARCH AS 'READING PRACTICE': AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Whole language approaches to the teaching of reading and writing have received broad support by US advocates of "critical pedagogy". This paper outlines a case study of the Australian implementation of whole language inservice courses for the teaching of literacy in elementary schools. Drawing from post-structuralist theory and critical linguistics, it models a discourse analytic approach to curriculum research. It is argued that a critical analysis of curriculum projects depends on a "situated reading" of extant relationships between the state and schooling.

CURRICULUM THEORIZING AND RESEARCH AS 'READING' PRACTICE: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction: Curriculum and the Production of Reading Positions

Much of today's discussion I expect will centre on the recent move of the Hawke government towards a human capital model of state education and the stirring of a right wing 'back to the basics' movement in Australian politics (Smith et al. 1988). Yet however tempting a simple US/Australia comparison might be, the Australian situation is strikingly different. For one thing, it has been marked over the last decade with various kinds and levels of state-sanctioned progressive reform, reform which has involved 'critical pedagogy' advocates with teachers' unions, professional organizations, and state and federal departments. In order to provide a history and context for counter-strategies, I think it worthwhile to reconsider some of the liberal, progressive reforms which were spawned in the early years of Labor government - reforms which today are under apparent threat.

My comments today have a twofold purpose: first, to theorise the sociology of the curriculum as situated discourse analysis; and second, to describe a moment in the relationship of curriculum theory to state mandated reform in Australian schools. I want to model how a critical sociology of the curriculum can be construed as a historically and politically situated 'reading' of particular historical and discursive conditions. To exemplify this, I'll be discussing a case study of Australian curriculum reforms involving "whole language" approaches to literacy and concomitant calls for a "social/critical pedagogy". What is curious about this case is how virtually the 'same' curriculum project can be read differently according to which national context - Australian or US - it is proposed in.

I'd like to begin by providing some background which I think illustrates the more general theoretical matter at hand. The reason that I don't sound like my Australian colleagues here is that I migrated to Australia from Canada six years ago, after teaching and studying there for 12 years. Hired to teach curriculum subjects, my initial gist of the matter was that it was possible to bring from one state context to another particular frameworks for curriculum analysis.

I found that I could transplant a synthetic, new sociology curriculum framework into my teaching and research. This framework enabled me only to ask questions, about interests in a selective tradition, about the political economy of knowledge production, about curriculum in use, and about transferability of school competence into the outside world. What was problematic was deciding when to ask those questions, and how institutionally to go about asking these questions. Not surprisingly, my 'readings' of curriculum analysis and reform were very much a product of the North American context and discourse.

Little did I know that I was walking into the terrain of Queensland politics, the neo-colonial horror even foreign to most Australians. I did intuit, and I kept this to myself, that the emphasis on the achievement of equity and progressive reform pushed in many southern states and at the federal level might fall prey to both economic and cultural crisis that many believed the 'lucky country' was immune to.

From this perspective I came to two related conclusions: My first was that curriculum theory can provide a broad array of templates but that these are contingent on a related 'reading' of and positioning in the extant historical, social, cultural and economic conditions in, in this case, Australian schools and

society, a reading of the historical relationship between state and schooling, and a reading of the kinds of strategic intervention possible in Australia.

My second conclusion was that any critical curriculum theorising is itself contingent on such a situated reading of historical conditions. I include here even the neo-Habermasian model forwarded by Steve Kemmis and colleagues in the early 1980s (Kemmis 1985; Kemmis, Cole and Suggett 1983), and more recent calls for "critical pedagogy" in the US (Giroux 1983), despite their appearance of cross-contextual and universal validity. As R.W. Connell (1987: xi) recently commented, "theories don't grow on trees; theorizing is itself a social practice with a politics", and I might add, a history.

How do we explain this 'situatedness' of curriculum theory? Working from the models of critical systemic linguistics, Australian linguist Gunther Kress (1986; 1989) speaks of "reading positions" and "reading practices". His aim is to describe how particular discourses at once reflect the historical constraints of what Foucault (1977) would call the "author function" while at the same time prescribing and proscribing particular interpretive positions. I'll try to develop this point later today: for now let me suggest that a discourse analytic approach to curriculum theory - based on neomarxist and poststructuralist theory - has a dual significance: first, it allows us to see textbooks, policy documents, and the practical language of teaching as texts; and, second, it allows us to see our own endeavours at curriculum theory, research, development and implementation as metatexts.

The further analytic step - which my case study here touches on - is to understand how these texts are constructed from

identifiable reading positions and, at the same time, produce the reading positions and practices of students, policy makers, and others. The making of texts - whether textbook writing or conference paper writing - is a form of political practice with a history, one which in effect reconstitutes subjects and history. What I am suggesting here is that, far from being a cross-contextual and universal activity, curriculum theorizing and research must recognize its own status as text/discourse: that particular historical sites, locations, and conditions enable or disenable certain kinds of critique and theory; that critique and theories in turn can be seen to create subjectivities, whether those of academics, administrators, teachers and of school children.

These points can be illustrated by reference to curricular innovations in early literacy instruction. Here we can begin to see how more or less the 'same' pedagogical schemes can be analyzed, critiqued and reconstructed differently depending on one's position in a particular national state/school historical site, and in relation to discursive possibilities and omissions. What follows, then, is a 'reading' - in broad terms for others to comment on later - of a particular moment in curriculum theorizing, curriculum practice and the state in Australia, liberal reform of literacy teaching in the 1980s.

State Sanctioned Progressive Reform: Literacy & the Whole Child

Whole language approaches generally encompass the ensemble of practices developed by Yetta and Kenneth Goodman, Donald Graves and others in the US, Don Holdaway and Marie Clay in New Zealand as an alternative to traditionalist and skills based approaches to reading and writing in primary schools. Detailed appraisal of

such practices - process writing, shared book experience, 'running records', literature based reading programs - is beyond my script here. For now note that this orientation has been advocated in the US and Australia by those critical of calls for the 'basics' and more management oriented approaches to literacy, by advocates of a critical pedagogy (e.g., Taxel, pers. com., Sept. 1988; Shannon 1988). For example, in his excellent critique of commercial reading materials in US schools, Patrick Shannon (1988) argues that whole language is one way of breaking the cycle of corporate deskilling of teachers. Similarly, Giroux (1987) has argued that the emphasis on "languages of possibility" in process/conference approaches to writing can be a key component of "critical pedagogy". Hence, in the development of an educational counter-agenda to technicist and neo-classicist approaches to literacy, whole language has come to be viewed as a positive thesis for many US and Canadian educators concerned with "emancipatory" and "social critical" curriculum.

My concern here is not to debate the 'true' discourses of whole language: that I'll leave to linguists and psychologists. Rather it is to discuss the political concomitants and consequences of the 'practical' discourses of curricular reform.[1] The following analysis of this particular curriculum reform, then, centres on how the Australian discourses of whole language "construct reading positions and subject positions" of and for teachers and students (Kress 1986: 37).

First, based on a year long study we at James Cook University have just completed for the federal government (Luke et al. 1989), let me describe the historical context of this particular set of curricular reforms. This reform is in many ways a paradigm case of the role of progressive forces in state

institutions: it has marked the collaboration of the Federal Curriculum Development Centre - under Garth Boomer's leadership - with various state departments of education, with University and College based expertise, with professional organizations like the Australian Reading Association.

In many ways, the formal state level sanction of what has come to be known as 'critical pedagogy' in the US was predated in the Australian scene. In Australia, work by the likes of Garth Boomer, Stephen Kemmis, and Bill Hannon, among others, called for socially critically and 'negotiated' curricula. But instead of facing marginalization, as did much of the neo-Freirian work in the US of the late 70s and early 80s, in some instances such work was enfranchised within the state agendas, circulated via government commissioned reports and inquiries, state curriculum documents, teachers' unions and professional organizations.[2] These kinds of interventions were enabled in part by the more extensive federal level involvement in curriculum development in Australia than occurs in the US.[3]

Set up during Whitlam's labour government and sustained in the early years of the Hawke government, the Curriculum Development Centre was given funding and the mandate to provide for curriculum change in the country. Now the history, the ups and downs, and current status of that organization are something I'm hoping that Garth will cover today. But its work in the whole language area exemplifies its role as a state body committed to reform, committed to addressing the needs of working class children, migrant children, girls, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

Over the last 6 years, the total Federal and State

expenditure on the implementation of Early Literacy Inservice Course (South Australia Department of Education 1986), ELIC, has amounted to roughly 8-12 million dollars. ELIC - based on a New Zealand program developed at Auckland Teachers College - is a 10 session short course which introduces teachers to whole language materials and approaches To summarize its contents: it is designed to enhance a child-centred, more context-sensitive, less mechanistic approach to literacy which emphasizes children's personal voice in writing, personal choice in literature, the value of 'language rich' classroom environments, etc. Estimates are now that over 30,000 Australian teachers have completed the course; in some urban locales, virtually the entire elementary school teaching force completed the program. And many jurisdictions are now developing and financing similar courses for upper elementary and secondary teachers, this despite financially troubled times.

Now given the size of the Australian population, 16 million at last count, such an investment far exceeds any comparable curriculum reform effort in any other English speaking country. ELIC was financed by the Federal Government under funding auspices which explicitly emphasized 'equity issues': it was seen as a program which would ultimately enhance equality of educational opportunity.[4]

This said - and bearing in mind that whole language has been forwarded against the 'back to the basics' movement in the US - we can begin to assess its impact on the Australian situation. Our year long study assessed its impact in two jurisdictions: one semi-rural and one smaller capital city. What has emerged is an interesting and variegated picture: there has been some change in practice - and certainly many of the dubious aspects of

practice, overreliance on basal readers, extensive rote handwriting and grammar instruction, etc. have been significantly eroded. How this reform translated into classroom practice, as in all cases of educational reform, remains problematic: for example, most teachers argued that the most 'technical' and, in my estimation, important feature of ELIC - the teaching of Marie Clay's system of 'running records' - was inconvenient and difficult.

Of the various findings on classroom practice, teacher attitude, school support and administrative organization, I here want to focus on a change in what we could call the 'ideology of literacy'. Recall that I am not providing data on whether the program improved literacy - I'll leave that vexed question to be debated elsewhere. Instead, my focus here is on the reading positions and subjects constituted by the discourse of whole language, both the inservice materials themselves and the texts/classroom discourses that children participated in. Our brief, recall, was to check the degree to which funds earmarked for 'equity' had effected such change. The response to our queries of many teachers and principals was typified in the following comment made by a regional administrator: "whole language isn't an equity matter, its a matter of finding the most up-to-date, effective way of teaching literacy".

This position was corroborated in many interviews and a large scale questionnaire administered to several hundred teachers. We analyzed the rank ordering of 'goals of literacy training' and 'criteria for selection of curricular materials' using the Dunn-Rankin method of clustering responses. What we found was that teachers ranked lowest in their positing of "aims

of literacy instruction" the 'equity' related issues: social and economic mobility, critical thinking and academic preparation. Instead, they ranked highly "personal growth", "natural development" and, to a lesser extent, "skills acquisition" as significant goals (see Luke et al. 1989; cf. Luke in press/1989). Similarly, class, cultural and linguistic background of students, linguistic/generic structure of texts did not enter into their criteria for curriculum selection to any significant extent. Instead, they chose materials on the basis either of what children liked, or what they thought was 'quality' children's literature, almost exclusively selecting narrative. These attitudes were, furthermore, corroborated in much of our classroom observation and interview data.

How was the literate subject constituted by this particular curriculum? I would argue that an ethos of the whole, individual child had been achieved. As I (Luke in press/1988), Gilbert (1989), and Willinsky (1988) have argued elsewhere, this latest set of curriculum reforms has clear historical precedents both in literary romanticism and early 20th century educational progressivism. The human subject, and reading/writing position, constituted in this curriculum is the unsullied, natural learner of Rousseau and Wordsworth, the 'natural' language user of Humboldtian linguistics, and the industrial-era 'individual' of Deweyianism. Teachers are reconstituted as neutral "facilitators of natural language growth", who are ordained by ELIC to enhance "healthy functioning".

What resulted, I would surmise, is that the Australian reform was successful in the program's humanist terms - but failed to really generate a 'socially critical' approach to literacy teaching on the part of teachers. Clearly missing is an

increased awareness of those 'equity issues' under which some of the phases of ELIC were funded: a critical awareness of how literacy enables a selective tradition; of how children bring different class, linguistic and cultural backgrounds to the classroom; of how instruction can lead to the selective distribution of sociolinguistic competence and school values/knowledges'; how the cultural and literary canon is reconstructed, and so forth. In few of the classrooms we observed was 'critical thinking' or 'social empowerment' focal on the whole language agenda. For many teachers, literacy remained primarily 'natural' and 'psychological' achievement - and there was seemingly little enhanced concern about its social and cultural consequences and concomitants.[5] The danger, I suspect, is that without a critical political self-understanding, the romantic individualism of such programs can lead to the "splitting of the personal and social", what Michele Fine (1987: 166) calls the "curricular . . . psychologizing of public and political issues" as "personal and private concerns".

I am not here questioning whether whole language - or any other progressive curriculum reform - is a viable alternative to mimimum competence testing or the 'basics', however construed. Nor am I questioning the viability of the kind of alliance between US curriculum theorists and liberal educational forces called for by Giroux (1983) and Apple (1986). It is not for me, from an Australian context, to judge harshly such a tactical decision, as long as such decisions have a degree of self-understanding of themselves as tactical and preliminary. My concern here has really to set up a field between 'liberal'

intents and ideological outcomes: this I think is crucial as well to a critical analysis in the US context of 'whole language' pedagogies. As I have argued in Literacy, Textbooks and Ideology (1988b), this same 'field' existed in the mid century US and Canada, where a technocratic orientation towards curriculum coexisted with liberal egalitarian rhetoric. It's the delicate problem of showing that a good deal of progressive reform - cloaked in humanist and child centred discourse - hasn't really taken on with any seriousness the equity issues any better than traditionalism.

Curriculum Theorizing as Counter-Practice

What can we conclude from this? Perhaps that the same curriculum can, at the same historical moment, be serving quite different political and cultural purposes. Whole language may indeed be viewed as a vigorous alternative pedagogy in the US and Canada, in a situation where educators must contend with both the basics movement and the new classicism. In Australia, where it is seen by many teachers as the penultimate achievement in progressive curricular reform, as a pedagogical panacea, I have argued here that it is in need of both critique and reconstruction.

If we conceptualize curriculum research as a kind of counter-discourse, its form may entail "a reactivation of local knowledges - of minor knowledges....in opposition to the... hierarchisation of knowledge and the effects intrinsic to its power" (Foucault, 1980:85; cf. Eco, 1986). Accordingly, curriculum theorizing, criticism and development can be broadly conceived as a form of discursive 'counter-practice', as a micro and macropolitical activity which entails putting up divergent

readings of dominant texts of policy and pedagogy and generating counter texts.

From this point two key points arise: First, the micropolitics of curriculum critique and reform require both a reading and reformation of 'local knowledges'. Our generation of strategy and tactics depends both on readings of existing possibilities and omissions. Second, as a self-critical discourse analysis (see McHoul and Luke 1989), it is contingent both on a full recognition of its own status as as discursive practice: the academic subject must self-critically examine her or his own positioning as 'reader' of history, by making explicit the 'metanarratives' s/he refers to.

This might be quite simple and self-evident: that any historical approach to curriculum theorising must begin not only from a reading of the differing relations of state and intellectual, production, economy and reproduction, but from a recognition of its own material and discursive status - however homogeneous relations and conditions across Western countries may seem. But I would argue that this post-structuralist perspective on discourse doesn't require the "incredulity towards metanarratives" called for by Lyotard (1984: xxiv), and the implied relativism therein, but can coexist with a critical sociology of knowledge.

We can <u>begin</u> by problematicizing common analytic templates and categories: gender, class, discourse/text, labour. But we must also begin from the historical fact that the struggle of women, working class, indigenous and minority groups takes radically differing historical forms, just as the role of the state in cultural production takes different forms. Accordingly, the kinds of theorizing and development as counter practice we

propose must address these variations. The role of the curriculum theorist, like Eco's (1979) "role of the reader", is both constrained by the form, content and sites of the curricular and historical texts to be read, and it is proscribed by the institutional and discursive possibilities extant (Culler, 1985).

While this may be quite self-evident, it hasn't seen to hit home amongst many in the curriculum field, who carry advocacy of particular 'readings' and curricular 'texts' across national and international boundaries.

An attempt to get the 'right' curriculum theory and agenda - whether this be Tylerian or one which rhetorically calls for "emancipatory' pedagogy - may be to replicate the very positivist assumption of educational psychology: that knowledge proceeds on an inexorable movement towards a (abstracted and decontextualized) truth, whether that truth be about pedagogy or method, subjectivity or struggle.

As others today will no doubt explain in some detail, recently the Hawke government has begun reorganizing the post-secondary education sector, stressing fiscal rationalization around the need to produce skilled human capital (Smith et al. 1988; Luke 1988a). A similar attempt to reorient state school curricula is now underway: a national core curriculum, increased use of standardized assessment procedures and so forth are on the agenda. This attempt to generate improved economic performance through education has translated into calls for a technological training of students, in curriculum formations which retain concepts of "gradualism" and "individualism" from the 80s reforms described here (White 1988). As in Sputnik-era formations of the human capital argument, the Hawke government argues that such a

reorientation will (indirectly) better ensure equality of educational opportunity than previous models.

Working in this historical context, I for one will continue to support whole language programs like ELIC, but I will also continue to critique and qualify them, in the hope that the next renewal of Australian progressive/liberal reform learns from this last series. In short, it seems to me all the more important that we critically reassess and reconstruct those 'liberal' curriculum reforms even when they are potentially threatened.[6]

There are of course myriad other contrasting Australian historical and political issues interwoven here which I haven't touched on: for instance, the degree to which a strong trade union tradition, Labor state and federal governments enable collaboration between progressive curriculum theorists and teachers; the enabling possibilities of state and regional control vs. US-style local school districts; or, the degree to which a British civil service tradition enables or disenables educational reform; the retention of a British matriculation examination system in lieu of a US psychometric tradition: these might be matters that Steve and Garth wish to take up further on.

Here I have but constructed a 'metatext' around a particular curricular text. This Australian case of what Willinsky (1987) calls the "new Romanticism" I think poses a caveat for US curriculum theorists advocating critical pedagogy: that to sanction progressive, yet depoliticized theory and programs because they are palatable for local and state implementation and useful in combatting the New, now old, Right may bear a cost. If we do so, it must be with a full awareness of the limitations of such programs. For to advocate progressivism against technicism, to support a depoliticised

individualist ethos - my own historical work and that of others would seem to indicate - can merely be to substitute on form of acritical practice for another, one form of legitimation for another.

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Notes

1. Here I refer to the Foucauldian distinction between connaissance ('true', discursively legitmated knowledge) and savoir ('practical' knowledge) (Foucault 1980).

2. For example, Kemmis and colleagues at Deakin University have been involved with Northern Territory educational officials in developing 'negotiated' approaches to Aboriginal education; to cite another case, in Queensland, by far the most conservative state in Australia, both whole language approaches and the work done by M.A.K. Halliday and colleagues at Sydney University has been incorporated into the state primary language arts curriculum.

3. There is no comparable federal role in Canada, although the Provinces all deploy regional curricula.

4. Currently, ELIC continues, though financed at the state rather than federal level. Despite the cutback of federal support - by a Hawke government now interested in accountability, scientific and basic skills, assessment and a national core-curriculum - it has even begun to be widely implemented in the seemingly insulated areas of North Queensland; a version for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has emerged. Most recently, the ELIC materials, via an Australian publisher, have been licensed to the state of New York (J. Smith, pers. com., 9/88).

5. The various models of critical pedagogy advocate a Freirian conscientization process as key to the teaching of critical literacy (e.g., Giroux, 1983; 1987), stressing personal voice and self-disclosure. I would argue that many recent versions of both whole language and critical pedagogy stop short of positing as essential exacting study of local social and cultural consequences and concomitants of literacy described in Heath (1983) or adequate theorization of the social processes of literacy development at work in 'conscientization'. The latter is taken up in Elsasser & John-Steiner (1977).

6. Various politically based, though sympathetic critiques of whole language-style programs have emerged: for a preliminary commentary on the consequences of the California Reading Initiative for minority learners, see Freeman (1988). Church et al. (1989) discuss the contingent relationship in practice between whole language and "consciousness raising" in Nova Scotia schools, arguing that there is nothing intrinsicially political about whole language. Edelsky (1988) comments on potential "alienation" in whole language programs.

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